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ABSTRACT

Seven job-related basic skills identified as skills employers want are as follows: (1) learning to learn; (2) reading, writing, and computation; (3) oral communication and listening; (4) creative thinking and problem solving; (5) personal management, including self-esteem, goal setting, motivation, and personal and career development; (6) group effectiveness, including interpersonal skills, negotiation, and teamwork; and (7) organizational effectiveness and leadership. The importance of workplace literacy has been underscored by the link between basic skills and productivity. The importance of "functional context" to basic skills training for adults is illustrated by programs for extreme low-level literate persons who need long-term intensive adult literacy programs, programs for improving the effectiveness of training through basic skills improvement, and simulation programs that illustrate the effects of on-the-job mistakes without jeopardizing the employee or the work process. The steps for developing programs to improve job-related basic skills are as follows: identify the problem; prepare an action plan; design, develop, and implement curriculum; and evaluate and monitor the program. Workplace literacy programs can improve worker self-esteem and job performance, company productivity, and the nation's competitiveness. (13 references) (CML)

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ERIC DIGEST No. 94

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Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

JOB-RELATED BASIC SKILLS

Once considered primarily a social issue, literacy has now become a business need. Changes in the nature of jobs and the composition of the work force are making workplace literacy programs a necessity. Although definitions of workplace literacy are much debated, many agree that the reading, writing, and analytical skills needed at work differ from those taught in schools or traditional literacy programs. The dimension of context is emerging: job-related basic skills are those skills needed to function successfully in the context of the workplace--in the performance of a job.

In light of the recent explosion of information on workplace literacy and basic skills, this *Digest* updates a previous edition (Thiel 1985) by defining job-related basic skills and reviewing the current consensus on their importance. Levels of job literacy, examples of programs, and recommendations about ways to make skill development programs work are discussed. Background information on workplace literacy may be found in related ERIC products (Imel 1988, 1989; *Workplace Literacy Annotated Bibliography* 1990).

What Are These Skills and Why Are They So Important?

The concept of job-related basic skills goes beyond mere reading and writing. Carnevale, Gainer, and Meltzer (1989) organize these "skills employers want" into seven groups or levels that build upon the skills of the previous level:

1. Learning to learn
2. Reading, writing, and computation
3. Oral communication and listening
4. Creative thinking and problem solving
5. Personal management (self-esteem, goal setting, motivation, personal/career development)
6. Group effectiveness (interpersonal skills, negotiation, teamwork)
7. Organizational effectiveness and leadership

The importance of workplace literacy has been underscored by the undeniable link between basic skills and productivity. Daily reading is now a requirement of almost every job. Many jobs now require higher levels of education, a trend that is expected to continue. Now being recognized is the connection between basic skills and competitiveness--of the United States in the global market, of businesses, and of individuals seeking to improve their employment status (*Bottom Line* 1988).

However, as Sticht (1989) reports, "programs that offer basic skills training prior to and separate from vocational programs are not particularly effective in improving either basic skills or vocational knowledge" (p. 2298). The importance of "functional context" to basic skills training is illustrated by programs described in the next section.

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Types of Basic Skills Problems and Solutions

Several levels of basic skills problems can be identified (Mikulecky 1989). First are extreme low-level literate persons, who need long-term intensive adult literacy programs, in which offerings range from basic functional survival skills to General Educational Development (GED) preparation. A second strand includes workers whose limited reading, math, computer, or study skills hinder their ability to benefit from technical training. An approach that integrates basic skills instruction with job training or upgrading can improve job performance for these workers. The third level involves job-specific literacy programs designed to relate to actual job tasks. The intent often is to prevent job-related literacy mistakes that affect safety, productivity, or promotability. Short-term basic skills instruction is aimed at accomplishing specific tasks and immediate goals, for example, map reading or preparation for a certified test (Askov et al. 1989).

North Carolina State University's adult basic education program is an example of the first approach (Rosenfeld 1987). Its objectives are basic literacy skills improvement and GED preparation for physical plant workers. The program offers (1) reading and writing for students reading below the fourth-grade level, (2) intermediate classes for fifth- to eighth-grade reading level, and (3) GED preparation classes. Students get released time for instruction in small groups, which focuses on using students' own experiences and resources that are job- and culturally relevant.

The second strand--improving the effectiveness of training through basic skills improvement--is illustrated by the Onan Corporation. The technical training required by a new automated production process revealed that many employees lacked basic reading and math skills. The resulting Manufacturing Education Program provides general skills courses in communication, computers, and math as prerequisites to the technical training (Business Council for Effective Literacy 1987).

Domino's Pizza provides an interesting example of the third level (BCEL 1988). In collaboration with a consulting firm, the company is developing interactive videodiscs intended to improve reading and math skills while teaching the specific task of making pizza dough. Simulations illustrate the effects of on-the-job mistakes without jeopardizing the employee or the work process. The videodiscs diagnose individual skill levels and select appropriate instruction.

What's to Be Done?

The following steps for developing programs to improve job-related basic skills are derived from Askov et al. 1989; *Bottom Line* 1988; BCEL 1987; Carnevale et al. 1989; and Drew and Mikulecky 1987.

The first step is identifying the problem. What goals or performance standards are not being met? What projected changes will affect basic skills needs? Clarify and define specific skill needs and relate them to the company's human resource development policies and to workers' personal

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goals. Specify projected results for the company and the employees. Needs can be identified by performing a literacy audit, in which information on the skills needed to perform job tasks is collected through observation, analysis of written job materials, and interviews with employees and supervisors. Drew and Mikulecky (1987) and *Bottom Line* (1988) give details on conducting a literacy audit.

The results of the audit and an assessment of the organizational climate, resources, and needs can be used in preparing an action plan. Management and union support should be obtained, and supervisors and employees should be involved in planning. Determine whether company resources enable an in-house program, or because few small businesses can afford such programs, whether a partnership with schools, colleges, community organizations, or consultants is warranted. Consortia of businesses or unions with like needs are another approach. Examples are the Consortium for Worker Literacy, which provides literacy classes for members of eight New York City unions, and GRASP Adult Learning Center, which contracts with Chicago small businesses to provide customized basic skills training (BCEL 1987).

The action plan should tie goals to incentives for participation (for example, paid release time, potential promotions). A secure, unthreatening environment provided for instruction, at the worksite if possible, should avoid associations with traditional schooling. The program should be presented as part of regular training, with a neutral name to minimize the stigma attached to illiteracy. Other considerations are whether the program will be open ended or of fixed duration; whether participation will be voluntary, mandatory, or referred; and whether costs will be borne by the employer, the employee on or off work time, or in combination. Many programs have continuous offerings or flexible scheduling to accommodate shift workers' hours. Increased numbers of women, minorities, and immigrants in the labor force mean that attention must be paid to such factors as child care and English as a second language in order to eliminate barriers to full and effective participation.

In designing, developing, and implementing curriculum, use eclectic, individualized techniques and organize content by job tasks, building on employees' job knowledge. Include problems and simulations of actual job situations, and use actual work materials as texts. Let employees work together and learn from each other. Avoid taking a "deficit" perspective; use experiences workers bring to learning. In teaching reading, include reading-to-do skills such as following directions as well as reading-to-learn skills that will help employees benefit from further training. Because on-the-job reading emphasizes reading only what is needed, teach sorting and prioritizing skills.

In considering the uses of instructional technology such as computers and interactive video, note that media can offer privacy, individualization, potential achievement gains, cost-effectiveness, and flexibility. However, technology is subject to change, involves some cost and expertise, and may not be appropriate for the level of instruction.

Considerations for evaluating and monitoring the program include having explicit measurement standards; using pre- and posttests based on results of the literacy audit; providing frequent feedback to employees and supervisors; measuring success by application of skills in job performance; and including observations of changes in work habits and attitudes as well as student reactions.

Each basic skills improvement program has unique characteristics, because of each company's culture, its specific literacy and training demands, its values and resources.

Workplace literacy programs can improve worker self-esteem and job performance, company productivity, and the nation's competitiveness. In the current clamor over literacy, it should be recognized that much more is needed than just reading and writing, and much more is at stake.

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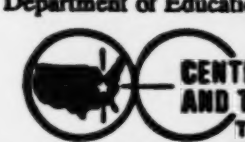

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